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INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 2803  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0646  
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RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L KUALA LUMPUR 000588

SIPDIS

FOR EAP/MTS AND INR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/15/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [MY](#)

SUBJECT: SURPRISINGLY CLOSE BY-ELECTION AND POPULARITY POLL  
A BOOST FOR NAJIB

Classified By: A/DCM Marrie Schaefer for reasons 1.4 b and d.

Summary and Comment  
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¶1. (C) A near victory in a by-election in the heart of opposition territory along with an apparent surge in Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak's popularity have provided a boost for the PM and his ruling Barisan National (BN) coalition. Speculation that Najib might seek an early snap election appears unfounded. The opposition coalition, suffering from internal bickering, appears to be losing momentum, but there is no indication Najib would change his reported plans to wait until 2013 for national elections. End Summary and Comment.

¶2. (SBU) According to a recently released Merdeka Centre popularity poll, the PM's favorability rating surged from 42% upon taking office April 2 to 65% on July 1. More significantly, the PM's popularity rose to 74% among the minority Indians, and 48% among the minority Chinese, suggesting that the BN is regaining some of the influence lost since the March 2008 General Elections. (Comment: The Merdeka Centre considers itself a non-biased apolitical institution and conducts polls in a scientific manner. It enjoys a solid reputation as a credible and legitimate polling organization. End comment.)

¶3. (SBU) In a contest it was expected to win handily, the opposition Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) barely edged out the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) in a July 14 by-election in the northeastern state of Kelantan. The by-election was held to replace a 5-term PAS assemblyman who died in June. The PAS candidate retained the seat for PAS by securing 5,348 votes, just 65 votes more than his UMNO challenger. Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, who ran the election campaign on behalf of the BN and UMNO, said he was not disappointed with the results, as UMNO had clearly gained ground compared to the 2008 General Elections, when PAS defeated UMNO by 1,352 votes. (Comment: even if UMNO had won this by-election, it would not have changed the balance of power in the state of Kelantan and would not have had any impact at the state or federal level. However, the opposition has now won 6 of 7 by-elections held since the March 2008 General Elections, and the BN devoted considerable resources in this contest. End Comment.)

¶4. (SBU) In the wake of the Merdeka Centre poll, several opposition politicians and non-government controlled media outlets have challenged PM Najib to call snap elections and earn a public mandate to hold the highest office in the country. PM Najib coolly downplayed the calls, stating that "the current mandate of the government would not expire anytime soon." (Comment: We believe that despite the

increase in approval ratings, Najib will not call for General Elections any time soon. According to the Constitution, Najib must call for a General Election within 5 years of the last General Election. End Comment.)

KEITH